

Holy Spirit and You

Advance in Faith 1 — Unit 3 Week 4 — Holy Spirit's gifts (1)



Introduction

In this session and the next, we are looking at the gifts of the Spirit.

There are several lists of gifts in the New Testament:

- a) **Romans 12:3-8** explains how people are motivated to contribute to communal life in different ways.
- b) **Ephesians 4:11** says the resurrected Messiah gave gifts to his realm: leaders who empower his people to serve.
- c) **1 Corinthians 12–14** is an extended discussion of how Holy Spirit empowers believers to operate as Jesus-in-the-world, doing far more than we could normally do.

Don't just combine all those into one big list! Each list contributes to the message of its own letter and belongs in that context:

- a) The first describes gifts from **God**—differences in the way he has made us.
- b) The second describes gifts from **Christ**—appointments he made when he received authority to rule.
- c) The third describes gifts from **Holy Spirit**—ways that he enables us to function together as Jesus' body.

It's also important to understand that these lists are not exhaustive, just samples. God works in many ways, beyond these examples.

In this session, we will concentrate on the third list—gifts given by Holy Spirit, empowering us together to function as Jesus' body.

Context of Corinth

Let's take a moment to set 1 Corinthians 12–14 in context. Corinth was destroyed by Roman armies in 146 BC, and later rebuilt under Julius Caesar. It had the perfect location for north-south trade and east-west trade. Ordinary people became rich here, so there was a great deal of social competition. This social pressure showed up in the church too: Paul warns them against factions, and teaches them to follow the upside-down wisdom of God—in which a crucified man has become honoured as Lord of all.



The Corinthian Christians were not lacking when it came to spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 1:7), but they were misusing the Holy Spirit's gifts as status symbols to prove their own spirituality. Paul wrote to correct them. He does not discourage them from using the gifts; he asks them to use the gifts to build up Jesus' body instead of misusing the gifts to build their own status.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul starts with the basics: a person who doesn't know Jesus is being led into all sorts of meaningless paths by whatever gods they submit to: pleasure, money, ... These gods are voiceless, but they still lead people astray (v.2). By contrast, Holy Spirit has a voice, and what he says it is that earth is no longer under the control of evil: it is now restored to God, with God's appointed person in charge—Jesus! Jesus is Lord. Jesus is running the world. Jesus is in charge, so everyone must submit to his authority: everyone must live as he says. That is the Holy Spirit's message. Holy Spirit will never put Jesus down and elevate something else instead (like your own ego). Holy Spirit will always elevate Jesus and his kingship. That's the fundamental principle you need to know as you listen for Holy Spirit's voice (1 Cor. 12:1-3). Holy Spirit leads you into a lifestyle of submission to Jesus' authority and declaring him Lord of all.

Paul's second point is that different gifts come from the one Spirit. There is only one Holy Spirit, so whatever gift you have, whatever gift you are using, you are an agent of the same Holy Spirit (v.4). Consequently, it makes no sense for us to act competitively, as if we were saying, "I've got a better gift than you!" Holy Spirit is not like that: he combines us to work cooperatively, to function as Jesus-in-the-world. He has no interest in giving someone a gift so the person can say, "Look, aren't I important!"

Sometimes children act like that at Christmas. A child may think, "Well Auntie Jenny gave me a better gift than she gave you, so she must like me more, and I'm more important than you." That kind of childish thinking is:

- a) probably wrong (not what Auntie Jenny intended),
- b) totally selfish (a way of promoting the self),
- c) damaging to family relationships.

Paul's main point is that Holy Spirit is the life of Jesus' body. A body is far more than the bits and pieces that make it up: its value is the life in it. Holy Spirit regenerated us not to make us a bunch of competitive individual components, but to make us an organism—functioning as Jesus in the world! That's Paul's main point: he uses the word *body* 18 times in 16 verses (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

A living organism lives to benefit the whole. Each part functions for the good of the whole body. The foot takes the body places. The hand lifts food to feed the body, grooms it, and does whatever work the head wants done. Holy Spirit regenerated us and put us together as Jesus' living body, so each part of the body is empowered by Holy Spirit to do what King Jesus (the head) wants done in his realm.

Let's take a look at the examples Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10.

Example 1: a word of wisdom

Imagine you have a friend who has a real dilemma. They're cornered, trying to choose between two really bad outcomes. Either way, they lose. You're praying for them, "Help, God!" Holy Spirit drops into your heart a pearl of wisdom that reveals another way through the impossible dilemma—a way neither of you had even imagined. You share this wisdom with your friend, and you can see the relief in her face. A timely "word of wisdom" given by the Spirit can be so liberating! You feel good, because your friend feels good.

Holy Spirit did not give this gift so you could walk around going, "Aren't I wonderful? I got a word of wisdom from the Spirit!" He gave you this word of wisdom to bring relief to your friend because God loves her. The gifts of the Spirit are for the common good, not for self-honour.

Example 2: a word of knowledge

Imagine you are having coffee with someone you don't know so well. They're opening up to you, but you have a feeling that there is more to the story than they've shared so far. As the hour progresses, you realise that there's something else going on—something they can't talk about. It's too hard to share, perhaps even too hard to even face. So while you are listening to them, you are also listening to Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit drops an impression in your heart—something you would not have known naturally. With some trepidation, you ask the question, "Is this what happened?" and share the impression in your heart. The person stops, looks a little frightened, and says, "How did you know?" You respond, "God knows all about it. He was with you then, when it all went wrong. He's been with you ever since. And he dropped that into my heart now because he cares for you."

Holy Spirit helps us with a "word of knowledge" *because* we don't know each other as well as we need to. When God's work is complete, we will know each other in ways we can scarcely imagine now: we will know each other as fully as he knows us. When that happens, there will be no need for "gifts of knowledge", but right now we need Holy Spirit's help in our relationships, so we can care for one another. (That's exactly what Paul says in the next chapter: 13:8-12.)

Example 3: a gift of faith

Imagine you're walking past a table where two friends are talking. You overhear Julia telling her friend she needs an eye operation. You have this prompting from Holy Spirit to pray for her, so you say, "Sorry: I overheard your conversation. Would you like me to pray for

you?” Julia doesn't attend church, so she says, “I'm not sure I believe in that kind of thing.” You're not sure whether to continue, so you say, “I think God wants to heal you so you don't need an eye operation, but I won't interrupt you don't want.” She says (with no conviction at all), “Well, it can't hurt.” So you go ahead and pray a simple prayer for God to heal her eye.

I had that experience, and it was several years before I bumped into Julia again. When I did, she admitted she had been avoiding me. When she went to her specialist surgeon, he said, “Well, I don't know what's happened, but you don't need this operation.” She found herself confronted with the living God. “I wasn't just avoiding you,” she told me, “I was trying to avoid God.” Yet, here she was, regularly attending a Baptist church I was visiting.

What confused me about that experience was that I had believed that God could heal someone if they had faith, and yet she clearly stated that she had no faith at all. But that doesn't stop God! Holy Spirit had dropped into my heart a “gift of faith,” a conviction that God was at work here, revealing himself to Julia. You see (or hear) what God is doing, and so you speak it out.

That's exactly what Jesus did in John 5. He came into Jerusalem by the pool of Bethesda where a *multitude* of invalids lay (John 5:3). He walked up to *one* of them and healed him ... leaving the others there. When asked why he healed that one, Jesus replied:

John 5:19 Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.

What can you see Father doing? See and speak. That's how the gift of faith works.

Example 4: Healings

The Gospels record many cases of healing. We've already noted that Jesus did not heal everyone. The healings were signs pointing to something greater. Disease is one of things that's currently wrong with the world. Ultimately—when we receive our resurrection bodies (Romans 8:23)—there will be no disease or decay. Jesus' healings were signs that pointed forward to the way God would ultimately have authority over the world and everything would be put right. Healings are therefore signs of the kingdom (God's authority as our ruler).

Jesus entrusted the same kingdom authority to his followers:

Luke 9¹ When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and

to cure diseases,² and he sent them out to proclaim the **kingdom** of God and to **heal** the sick.

Luke 10¹ After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.² He told them, "...⁹ **Heal** the sick who are there and tell them, 'The **kingdom** of God has come near to you.'"

We cannot twist God's arm to heal everyone now. When God does heal, it is not because we have a right to demand it but because God has given a sign in the present of what it will be like in the age to come when everything is restored under his management. Miracles and healings in the present are a taste of "the age to come" (Hebrews 6:5).

Example 5: Miracles

Don't diminish the significance of these "signs" when Holy Spirit gives them! God wants to show his authority, especially to people who don't know him.

When God told Moses to go and demand that Pharaoh release God's people, Pharaoh's first response was this:

Exodus 5² Pharaoh said, "Who is YHWH, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know YHWH and I will not let Israel go."

So what Moses did was a series of "signs." Pharaoh resisted the initial signs (Exodus 4:28), and so Moses worked ten signs that demonstrated to Pharaoh that YHWH rules the earth and Pharaoh must submit to his authority (Exodus 10:2).

What Moses did was to announce what YHWH decreed (blood, gnats, frogs, whatever), and let YHWH perform the sign. In this way, Pharaoh gradually came to understand who YHWH was. When Pharaoh resisted, it came down to God's power, not Moses' persuasiveness.

That's how we partner with Holy Spirit! The gospel doesn't need manipulative tear-jerking techniques to convince people of God's power. People need to see God's power! But God's power is quite strange—radically different from the way people normally demonstrate their power. In this evil world, powerful people force their will on others; yet Jesus demonstrated his power by being crucified by others! The kingdom of God operates a completely upside-down kind of power. Like Moses before Pharaoh, we regularly find ourselves feeling powerless, afraid, and vulnerable—as vulnerable as Jesus was before Pilate! It is our very powerlessness that demonstrates to people the reality that God is at work here.

Paul describes his work among the Corinthians like this:

1 Corinthians 2 ¹ When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of **the Spirit's power**, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

Paul declared Jesus' kingship. Holy Spirit demonstrated it. The Corinthians believed it. That's how we present the good news.

Conclusion

God is love. He wants you to know his healing love, and he wants to give his love to others through you. Many people in your world will only ever experience God's love when they rub shoulders with believers like you.

Expect Holy Spirit to give you little gifts of love for the people in your world, to make God known through you. That's how Jesus works in the world today: his Spirit animates his body, empowering each part to express his restorative love.

Group Questions

1. Have you experienced Holy Spirit speaking or working through you into someone else's life? What happened?
2. How do we develop sensitivity to Holy Spirit like this, so we expect him to provide a word of wisdom, a word of knowledge, a gift of faith, healings, or miracles?
3. How do the gifts of the Spirit relate to evangelism?
How does God reveal himself to people?
How do the gifts help us to reveal the living God?

Memory Work

1 Corinthians 12:7 (NIV)

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

Take Home Exercise

Read **2 Kings 4:8-37**.

Observe carefully how Elisha the prophet operates when his friend from Shunem comes calling (verses 25-32). Elisha and Gehazi know her quite well, for they stay at her house each time they pass through. But she doesn't trust Gehazi with her grief (v.26). You can understand why: he has little understanding or compassion: he even tries to push her away (v.27).

By contrast, Elisha senses her deep grief. His response is to ask God what's going on. On this occasion, God does not tell him (v.27). We aren't told why, but as the story unfolds we realise that she needs to give voice to her emotions—her grief, her resentment and anger at the injustice of her loss, her feeling that this is worse than if she never had a child since she never asked for one (v.28).

Do you see what Elisha did? He used his *natural* interpersonal skills to see her anguish, to feel her pain. Then he reached out to God for *supernatural* help to know what he didn't know, expecting a gift of knowledge. On this occasion, Holy Spirit does not give him that knowledge, because the Sunnammite is able to express her grief, and she needs to do so.

Practice what Elisha did. Use the natural sensitivity God has given you to be aware of the people around you. Then reach out to God expecting him to help you know what's wrong and how you can respond. God will give you whatever gift is useful to care for this person. Expect Holy Spirit to help you when the person cannot tell you what's wrong. They may now know what's at the root of their struggle. Or they may too ashamed or afraid to tell. Expect God to show you when the person is stuck. Reveal what he shows you gently. It need not be a "Thus saith the Lord!" You might reveal it with a question, e.g. "Would it have anything to do with ..."

As Elisha's story unfolded, he gave his servant every opportunity to learn, but Gehazi did not respond with genuine love. He just took Elisha's stick, plonked it on the dead child's face!!!, and then wandered out again as if he knew that wouldn't work. When Elisha goes to pray for the boy, his actions are so different, revealing a great deal more pathos, sensitivity, identification with the child, depth of care, and persistence.

Is there something to learn from Gehazi and Elisha about how to operate the gifts of the Spirit? Prepare to share your story with the group next time we get together.